



A profile approach to self-determination theory motivations at work

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 April 2012

Available online 27 September 2012

Keywords:

Cluster analysis

Profile analysis

Self-determination theory

Motivation

ABSTRACT

Self-determination theory (SDT) posits the existence of distinct types of motivation (i.e., external, introjected, identified, integrated, and intrinsic). Research on these different types of motivation has typically adopted a variable-centered approach that seeks to understand how each motivation in isolation relates to employee outcomes. We extend this work by adopting cluster analysis in a person-centered approach to understanding how different combinations or patterns of motivations relate to organizational factors. Results revealed five distinct clusters of motivation (i.e., low introjection, moderately motivated, low autonomy, self-determined, and motivated) and that these clusters were differentially related to need satisfaction, job performance, and work environment perceptions. Specifically, the self-determined (i.e., high autonomous motivation, low external motivation) and motivated (i.e., high on all types of motivation) clusters had the most favorable levels of correlates; whereas the low autonomy (i.e., least self-determined) cluster had the least favorable levels of these variables.

Published by Elsevier Inc.

1. Introduction

Across the many theories of work motivation it is quite common to conceptualize motivation as varying primarily in quantity rather than in quality or type (Gagné & Deci, 2005). As an exception, self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) suggests that there are two primary types of motivation that can guide individual behavior: extrinsic motivation (i.e., to attain a reward or consequence separable from an activity itself) and intrinsic motivation (i.e., to do something because of an inherent inclination or interest; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Further, extrinsic motivation can be divided into four types ranging from least to most autonomous: external (i.e., for reward or praise), introjected (i.e., to avoid guilt or anxiety), identified (i.e., because the person sees value in the activity), and integrated (i.e., because the person has internalized the reasons for engaging in the behavior; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Koestner & Losier, 2002; Ntoumanis, 2002; Wang & Biddle, 2001).

Research from a variety of domains has linked these distinct forms of motivation to situational characteristics (e.g., Bono & Judge, 2003), well-being outcomes (e.g., Ryan, Deci, & Grolnick, 1995), and effective functioning (e.g., high effort expenditure, better learning; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Connell, 1989). However, most of this research has adopted a 'variable-centered' approach in which the focus is on testing the relationships of each type of motivation with other variables (cf. Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984). Although such an approach provides valuable information about the direct and unique links of each motivation with other variables, it ignores the possibility that (a) distinct constellations of motivational profiles exist in the population and (b) these SDT motivation profiles may correspond to differences in other variables. This perspective is consistent with taking a 'person-centered' approach to conceptualizing SDT motivations, arguing that distinct motivational profiles might exist and that investigating these motivation 'types' might reveal unique insights into the ways in which SDT motivations tend to co-occur and the effects of these profiles on other variables.

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Studies conducted in the educational and sport realms have made some progress in looking at motivation profiles (e.g., Ntoumanis, 2002; Ratelle, Guay, Vallerand, Larose, & Senécal, 2007; Wang & Biddle, 2001), but to our knowledge no organizational research has examined this issue. The present study aims to bridge this gap in the literature by (a) assessing each of the primary motivations described by SDT in an organizational setting, (b) identifying motivation profiles in our sample, and (c) linking the motivation profiles to correlates at work.

2. Motivation from a self-determination theory perspective

Intrinsic motivation is present when individuals do something for pleasure or enjoyment, whereas extrinsic motivation occurs when individuals do something because of external forces (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Although authors have long recognized a distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (e.g., Porter & Lawler, 1968), SDT is unique in that it further divides extrinsic motivation into four types (i.e., external, introjected, identified, integrated) that vary in the degree to which motivation has been internalized (Gagné & Deci, 2005). External regulation is the most extrinsic form of motivation as it represents motivation due to explicit external control (Ntoumanis, 2002). Introjected motivation is the second-most extrinsic form of motivation, reflecting compulsion, avoidance of guilt or anxiety, and a sense that one “should” or “ought to” complete the behavior (Koestner & Losier, 2002; Ntoumanis, 2002; Wang & Biddle, 2001). These two types of extrinsic motivation are described as controlled forms of motivation because they place the impetus for action solely with external factors (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998).

Identified motivation describes regulation of behavior for reasons more consistent with one's goals and identity, with individuals seeing the actions as personally important (Koestner & Losier, 2002). People acting based on an identified motive do so because they “want” to as opposed to feeling that they “ought” to, as in introjected motivation (Wang & Biddle, 2001). Finally, integrated motivation is the most internalized form of extrinsic motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005) in which the person values and accepts the reasons for the behavior, though he/she may still not consider it to be inherently fun or interesting (Gagné & Deci, 2005). For instance, a nurse may fully identify with actions aimed at alleviating patient suffering, though he/she may not consider the actions to be enjoyable. Identified and integrated extrinsic motivations, along with intrinsic motivation, are autonomous forms of motivation (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998).

Research has tended to examine the relationships of each motivation with other variables, either by itself or in the presence of the other motivations. For example, Reeve (2002) noted the following correlates of autonomous (i.e., internalized) motivation in students: academic achievement (Miserandino, 1996), perceived competence and self-worth (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986), positive emotionality (Ryan & Connell, 1989), creativity (Amabile, 1985), and retention (Vallerand & Bissonette, 1992). Other authors have suggested that intrinsic, integrated, and even identified motivation are related to increased achievement, positive affect, persistence, effort, and well-being (e.g., Frederick-Recascino, 2002; Koestner & Losier, 2002).

Research on SDT in work contexts has generally found that autonomous motivations (e.g., intrinsic, integrated, identified) and factors known to enhance autonomous motivation (e.g., autonomy-supportive environments) lead to better well-being and effectiveness than controlled motivations (e.g., external, introjected; Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Bono & Judge, 2003; Deci et al., 2001; Greguras & Diefendorff, 2010; Ilardi, Leone, Kasser, & Ryan, 1993; Kasser, Davey, & Ryan, 1992). However, there is some debate about the prevalence and effects of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations at work (e.g., Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000). For example, some authors suggest that intrinsic motivation is less likely to occur in the work context than in other realms (e.g., hobby, sport) because of the inherent focus on compensation and recognition at work (e.g., Baard, 2002). However, other authors note that extrinsic rewards issued independent of task engagement, as in the case of salaried positions, do not necessarily undermine intrinsic motivation (e.g., Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999).

3. Person-oriented versus variable-oriented approaches

Person-centered research has been referred to as “a holistic, interactionistic view in which the individual is seen as an organized whole, functioning and developing as a totality” (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997, p. 291). This approach is in contrast to the variable-centered perspective, which aims to assess relations between variables across individuals (Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984). Thus, a point of distinction between the two approaches is that the person-centered perspective begins by identifying individuals with common attributes and then aims to describe how groups of homogeneous individuals function, whereas the variable-centered perspective starts by identifying variables of interest and then aims to describe how these variables function across individuals (Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984). In addition to answering different research questions, the two approaches are also associated with different analytic tools, with the variable-centered approach emphasizing correlation and regression analyses and the person-centered approach relying on cluster analysis and related profiling techniques. In the case of SDT, most of the research to date has been conducted from a variable-centered perspective (e.g., Baard et al., 2004; Ilardi et al., 1993; Kasser et al., 1992; Ryan et al., 1995). Such research is useful for understanding how particular motivations uniquely relate to outcomes, but it does not tell us much about how an individual's standing on multiple motivations might shape outcomes or whether some constellations of SDT motivations are more common at work than others.

4. The present investigation

In the current investigation, we measured the five motivations from SDT in a sample of employees from China. We then performed cluster analysis on the data to identify distinct motivation profiles in the sample. Cluster analysis is particularly

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